



TOXIC MASCULINITY: A STUDY OF THE CASE OF NAJMA IN ANITA NAIR'S NOVEL EATING WASPS

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ABSTRACT

We are surprised to hear women's daily experiences of violence. In our day to day scenario, we often witness trivial and horrid incidents of violence against women such as stalking, domestic violence, sexual harassment, acid attack, rape and so forth. In most cases, these are the result of toxicism of masculinity. Very often we observe that masculinity that is a positive aspect turns into a negative one because of its misconception formed in men's mind that perverts their mindset. The objective of my present research paper is to analyse the toxicism of masculinity, how much it is deep seated in men's disposition in the name of being masculine or 'a man' that it has jeopardised the lives of women.

In the novel *Eating Wasps* Anita Nair has brought together various wrenching issues that poison the lives of women across all religion, caste, class and age group. She writes with acute sensibility of a realist and explores the most recent issues of women convincingly. It seems she writes what she observes. The novel is an observation of the suffrage of women as is seen in our today's scenario.

An analysis of the case of Najma in Nair's *Eating Wasps* gives an insight into how toxic masculinity can canker the lives of women in our patriarchal structure of society that hold masculinity in high esteem and corrupts the concept of what it means to be 'a man'.

The paper also aims to find out some solutions to combat toxicism of masculinity.

An inductive research method is used to analyse the case of Najma and an observation of the incidents happening in our society is also made to draw out reason and solutions.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Femininity, Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

Before analysing the toxicism of masculinity and its dangers, I would discuss the concept of femininity and masculinity.

One's sex as a male or female is determined by nature. It is anatomical. Nature has made no difference between the two except a few biological differences. Being a male or female is biological but the concepts of gender or femininity and masculinity are the construct of our society that is because of the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. As Edwin Louis Cole has stated, "Being a male is a matter of birth, being a man is a matter of choice." And Simon de Beauvoir has put it in her book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman. It is our civilization as a whole that produces the creature, which is described as feminine."

Now femininity and masculinity are some peculiar traits that are attributed to man and woman, some attributes or characteristics that are conceived to constitute what is feminine and what is masculine in temperament. These are defined and fostered by traditional patriarchal culture of our society. (Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold controlling power placing woman in a subordinate condition. It is organized in such a way as to subjugate women to men in all domains of life).

By this cultural process some stereotypical feminine traits are identified as passive, submissive, emotional, empathetic, timid, fragile. And masculine traits are identified as active, dominant, rational, stoic, strong and muscular, assertive, adventurous. These are traditionally accepted characteristics of a male and female. Thus the attributes behaviour and roles are determined by the prejudiced stereotypical culture of our Indian society that is patriarchal in nature. Our society decides what a man and woman should be and ought to be in temperament and behaviour in both public and private sphere.

But the fact is that a man may be feminine in nature and women can be masculine. A man may have the attributes that are culturally associated with women and vice-versa. A human being can be masculine or feminine irrespective of one's sex. Further, the attributes of femininity and masculinity vary individual to individual, situation to situation. It gets influenced by a number of biological, psychological, cultural and social factors.

Thus, the concepts of femininity and masculinity are the by-product of our society and this stereotypical patriarchal society magnifies manliness. It endorses masculinity and fosters the idea that a man should always possess the traits that are attributed to masculinity such as strength, stoicism, brevity, self-sufficiency, rationality, virility, assertiveness that conform to the norms of being a 'man' to

maintain their status as men. Along with the society the films produced in India and the media too lead to the persistence of harmful notions of 'being masculine'.

This sense of masculinity and believing themselves to be operative power is so ingrained in our culture that a misconception of masculinity is formed in the minds of men unknowingly. Majority of men have developed a wrong notion of what it means to be masculine or a 'real man'. Some men are in pressure to conform to the norms of masculinity and it leads to the toxicism of masculinity that gives forth injurious consequences.

Masculinity is a positive aspect. What obnoxious and abhorrent is its being on the verge of toxicism. Now toxic masculinity is to be understood. It can be clearly said that when true masculinity gets astray in the name of being 'a real man', when the positive masculine traits turn into negative ones and get poisonous and hazardous for men, women and society as a whole, it is termed as 'toxic masculinity'. It is something that makes men perpetrators. It augments anti-feminine attitude in men.

This toxicism is the product of a set of strict rules that prescribe what 'being a man' should be. These toxic man rules place significant importance on 'manliness' based on dominance, aggression, exhibition of physical power, virility, glorification of violent behaviour, always to be a winner, lack of emotion (except anger that is held high in esteem). Any other emotion is a sign of weakness and weakness is unacceptable according to their masculine norms. Power is everything. It is equated with masculinity. Tenderness is rejected as it is equated with femininity. There is a tendency towards the elevation of masculinity. These are quite repressive ideas of manhood. These are destructive and disparaging aspects of manliness that are often accepted and glorified by many cultures.

According to these toxic masculine rules if a man does not exhibit enough of these traits, he may fall short of being a man. Some men get misled that they are failing at "being a man". This regressive description of manliness serve to foster harms to society. Some men become toxic trying to be real man. This toxic masculinity leads to misogyny and misogyny leads to violence. These derogatory traits nurture the devaluation and victimization of women. This toxicism is responsible for most of the violence done to women in any form whether in the premises of house or in society.

Now the present paper makes critical analysis of such a toxicism of masculinity as is seen in the case of Najma, a victim of acid attack in Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps*.

Analysis of the Case of Najma in the Novel Eating Wasps

Najma, a school teacher, was stalked by a man who was fascinated towards her and got obsessed to marry her. The girl did not know who that man was. She had often found him loitering by her seat in the train that she used to travel daily. First few days she did not think much of it, until one evening, she noticed the man was waiting for her outside the school and tailing her as she walked to the station. She was irritated but not afraid. She was not going to let him know that he has intimidated her.

After a forth night of stalking a grim, horrid incident took place that pestered her life for ever. One evening when she was in train on her way back to home that man came and sat across from her as the train left the station. His eyes were constantly catching her. She got afraid, rose and took another seat but the man still followed her there, persuaded the other man to move sitting opposite her saying that he was her 'Fiancé'. When Najma asked who he was he replied, 'the man you should marry' (Eating Wasps p.61). Now she was in utter fear watching his obnoxiousness.

Here the question raises why woman is stalked by a man. The stalking alludes that some men take women as violable object. Women are considered weak, delicate, helpless because of being a female by some perverted men.

The stalker called her his "fiancee", "arras" possessively and adamantly without asking her consent as if she were his asset and he himself her owner as this kind of toxic masculinity does not allow him to ask the "consent". Declaring himself her fiancé in public expresses his overweening sense of masculinity.

His toxic masculinity can also be seen in his controlling behaviour considering the girl his own object. He abused her for not wearing "burka" as if it were his choice how she should wear nor hers. He tries to be the operating power of the girl.

When the girl asked who he was, his reply 'the man you should marry' indicates that the men of toxic masculine traits take the women as their own property. Their sense of manliness make them believe that if they like girl or propose, she must accept them disregard of her choice. The stalker of Najma is adamant to marry her considering her an object to own, smashing her subjectivity, denying her autonomy. This is an abhorrent aspect of masculinity.

Najma replied that it was to be decided by her mother. At this the man snarled that he had asked her mother but she laughed at him and rejected his proposal saying that her daughter deserves better. Why should her daughter marry a kitchen help like him. This rejection had filled him with acute sense of humiliation and rage. Najma could see that he was furious, not just furious but beyond that. He hissed uttering abusive words, called her whore, bitch, shameless. His misogynistic attitude can be seen in his profaning the girl because of her education, boldness and beauty. 'Your Ammi is an arrogant bitch like you are. The two of you think you are above all of us'. She thinks you are too good for me. You are not better than a whore using your beauty to have your 'way with men' (Eating Wasps p.62). He was amok. The girl tried to pacify him but he was driven by ferocious determination. His rage only escalated.

He claims to be madly in love with her and cannot live if she does not marry him. But how a man can harm someone he loves.

The friends to whom he confided his humiliation and rage, told him that 'no man' would let such a slur go unpunished. So did the offender of the girl, Najma.

Any man or woman can accept or reject one's offer of marriage. Both have rights and freedom to accept or reject. It is not a matter of bondage or compulsion of acceptance. It is not a matter of disgrace at all, nor should be. But the very thought of rejection had made him feel so much humiliated that he could not let it go unpunished.

Many men get offended when a girl says 'no' as they think possessing a woman is an accomplishment and not getting is like a failure. As if getting a woman is like getting a trophy to satiate their sense of winning. Failure smashes their ego and distorts their image of being masculine in their own eyes. They feel that they would fail to prove their masculinity and would not conform to the norms of 'being a man' such is the case with stalker of Najma in the novel. His sense of manliness is hurt.

The feeling of the ignominy of being rejected is so strong that he has turned into a maniac, a ferocious beast. Manic gleam of rage could be seen in his eyes, his face was emitting fires of fury, tongue spewed venom, he hissed and snarled. He leand and stared at her. "I won't let you become anyone else's wife". (Eating Wasps P.63) Saying that he took out the bottle of acid and flung it in her face, surprisingly in public, in the train. If he can't no one else can possess such a thought makes it evident that it is just a matter of 'possession'.

All his attitude, behaviour, the words that he uttered make it explicit that he is a man of extreme toxic masculinity. And the heinous act that he committed is an expression not just of anger but of toxic manliness.

Suggestions to combat

This misconception of masculinity is responsible for most of the violence done to women. It is one of the most ignored flaws of our society. Now the question raises who is to be blamed, where lies the root and how to combat it.

Toxic masculinity is linked with patriarchy that emphasizes male superiority or dominating power. It has conditioned them to believe that they can do whatever they want to do with a woman. So first of all we need a change in men's mind-set. Men themselves can play a major role to eliminate it. They must learn or educate themselves what true masculinity is. They ought to learn to lead the life not in a masculine or feminine way but in a way that is just for all.

Some men get it from their upbringing. 'Don't cry like girl', 'boys will be boys', 'be a man' these are very common damaging messages, boys grow up to absorb. The guardian must be aware that they are not raising their sons with toxic masculine attitude. They must watch their toxic behaviour in any relationship.

Even in family some women are anti-feminine, having patriarchal bent of mind. Such Women must be given proper lessons to develop healthier attitude.

Films and media displaying toxic masculine behaviour that convey negative messages to males, should be curbed. There must be access to mental health services too in extreme cases of toxicism to make men emotionally healthier.

CONCLUSION

So we can conclude that the problem that India faces is not an ordinary one. Just training women through awareness campaigns, launching various woman empowerment schemes, making women aware towards their legal rights will not do. Our society demands some necessary changes in the traditional norms of masculinity, we need to bring a change in the mind -set of the men. Both men & women together should take initiative to purge the society of the menace of toxic masculinity taking it as a moral responsibility. It can't be achieved in a day but the society will go through transformation gradually.

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